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The State of the Art

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I'm going to speak about my belief that the theatrical arts are at a crossroads in the United States today—in danger of being rendered irrelevant—but that universities like Illinois Wesleyan can make an enormous contribution toward solving the problems. As one who specializes in theatre, I have a particular stake in the issue, but I hope that what I have to say will be meaningful to those of you whose only interest in the subject may be what you choose to watch on television and at the movies.

When I speak about the theatrical arts I mean the stage and the forms that have derived from it: films and television. And when I say that a crisis is occurring, it's because I believe that these "art forms" are all too rarely creating works of art.

One purpose of art is to divert and to entertain, of course, and the large numbers of people who attend films and watch television indicate that audiences are indeed being entertained. But another purpose of art—at least equally important—is to provide insight into the human condition, and to express those insights so creatively that we, the audience, become aware of ideas and attitudes that we hadn't previously contemplated. This is serious, often profound, business—but it can be expressed in many ways: in tragedy, of course, but also in comedy, in farce, in musicals. Whatever the genre, and even if the work is intended as entertainment and nothing more, what counts most is quality: for example, a fresh, lively, clever, innovative comedy is preferable to a stereotyped, hackneyed one. But it's my contention that few recent movies or television shows have attempted to go beyond the stereotypical.

What have they given us? Movies about tornadoes, about exploding heads, about car chases and car crashes, about mad slashers chasing terrified young women, complete with improbable plot twists and one-dimensional characters. Such movies seem to keep the audiences happy and they certainly provide work for special effects technicians—but what happened to the demands of art? I can recall, not too many years ago, when it was a commonplace that, if Shakespeare were alive today, he'd be writing screenplays. Well, that might or might not be true—no-one knows, of course—but I think I can say with some degree of assurance that he wouldn't be writing *Die Hard VI* or *Twister II* or *Mad Slasher XI*.

It's interesting to contemplate what would happen if some of the great theatrical geniuses of the past *were* alive today. Would American movies or commercial television be hospitable to Molière? to Ibsen? to Bernard Shaw? to Chekhov? to Sophocles? I think the probable answer is No—remembering that the recent spate of films based on the works of Shakespeare and Jane Austen

have come almost entirely from Great Britain. All of the playwrights I mentioned challenged their audiences to think; all of them treated their audiences as intelligent individuals capable of grappling with complex issues presented to them in dramatic form. All of them created multi-layered characters speaking well-crafted, often inspired language. With few exceptions, writers for television and American films seem neither to possess those skills nor to want to master them. Commercial television, by its own admission, aims its entertainment not at adults but at adolescents: for many years, television executives have said that their intention is to produce shows calculated to appeal to thirteen-year-old minds. Surely most movies aren't aiming any higher. In fact, since so many movies today are remakes of old television shows—and generally inferior remakes, at that—one could make the case that the movies have fallen below the level of television as a creative medium.

And the stage? I do believe that the stage still offers a refuge for an audience seeking something beyond diversion—but challenging plays are becoming evermore difficult to find, as technological spectacles, formulaic comedies on a par with the worst of television, and adaptations of old movies crowd out more creative endeavors. Many people, alas, go to the theatre primarily so that they can see the sorts of special effects that were once thought to be the province of the movies. Think of the falling chandelier in *Phantom of the Opera*, the helicopter landing in *Miss Saigon*, or *Beauty and the Beast* (which tries, insofar as possible, to be a duplicate of the animated movie).

Let me be clear: it's not that the subjects dealt with by plays, movies and television are necessarily trivial or unworthy of investigation. The problem is that the treatment is so often superficial. As an example, let me tell you about an experience I had during Short Term two years ago. I accompanied a group of students on a theatre tour of London, where we all saw *Miss Saigon*, a highly popular musical that takes some elements from the opera *Madame Butterfly* and applies them to America's misadventure in Vietnam. Nearly all of us—students and faculty alike—were hugely disappointed in the play and in its production. When we returned to Bloomington, all of the students were assigned to give oral reports based on the plays they had seen. One student, who analyzed the text of *Miss Saigon*, did a wonderful job, as she articulated a number of ideas that might have been explored fully in the musical—but were touched on only superficially. As she revealed to us in her report, *Miss Saigon* had the potential for exploring the alienation felt by both the Americans and the Vietnamese in a profound and meaningful way. It might have examined the function of the Western presence in Vietnam by questioning its role as a supposed savior and its failure to succeed. It might have investigated the exploitation of women (for most of the female characters in the play are prostitutes) as well as exploring the nature of exploitation. Instead, the musical generally skimmed the surface of these topics, with the result that—for those of us on the London travel course, at least—we spent a most disappointing evening in the theatre. The oral report we heard convinced

us that *Miss Saigon* had the potential to be a brilliant piece of work if only its creators had been able to dig beneath the surface and explore the rich material lying underneath.

Suppose for a moment that *Miss Saigon* had attempted and achieved more. Can a musical, even a brilliant musical, actually change our perceptions? Of course it can. The performing arts regularly influence our behavior. If that weren't so, sponsors wouldn't spend millions of dollars on television advertising in an attempt to persuade us to buy their brand of soap. And how are we being influenced if we're consumers of popular entertainment? For one thing, the continuous violence displayed on film and television screens is, in my opinion, making us callous to violence in our own lives. I cringe when I think about the influence so many movie murders, so much mayhem, so little respect for human life must have on audience members, especially those who are immature. And television's disdain of intellectuals (who are referred to as "talking heads," and who are invariably mocked in situation comedies) must have an effect, too, making people intolerant of those who read, those who study, those who express themselves with precision; and popular entertainment's emphasis on easy solutions to the most intractable problems must persuade some people, at least, that difficulties can be solved easily and painlessly, without financial or emotional cost, without planning, without devoting considerable time and energy to the proposed solutions. These are some examples of why I think our theatre today is in crisis—because, rather than enlarging our horizons, it's shrinking them, encouraging us to think less broadly, less creatively.

I want to be careful not to sound like Illinois Wesleyan's version of Bob Dole, who, in a highly publicized speech two years ago, lambasted excessive violence in movies, naming particular films that offended him and praising others. The fact that one of the films he chose to praise was, by all accounts, particularly violent, but starred a major Republican contributor, may make you feel—as I felt—that his preferences were based more on politics than on genuine conviction. Still, I find myself agreeing with the notion that our society is to some degree shaped and perpetuated by the violent images seen so often on movie and television screens. But my point is not confined to the portrayal of violence.

After all, some of the best drama—Greek tragedy, Shakespeare's histories and tragedies, *The Godfather* trilogy—have successfully employed violent themes, another illustration of the fact that no subject is inherently unworthy of dramatization—it's the treatment that makes the crucial difference; and, secondly, television's and the movies' preoccupation with gratuitous, excessive violence should be seen in the larger context of a crisis in the performing arts, of which the emphasis on violence is only one symptom.

Which leads me to another reason why so few works of art are being produced in the world of professional entertainment today: because not enough of

the people who work there think of themselves as artists. They describe their profession as “show business”—with the emphasis on “business.” I would argue, though, that theatre is not primarily a business, but an art form. Even more irritating, to my ears at least, are the references of professionals in television and films to what they call “the industry.” I think it’s unlikely that meaningful works of art can be created by those who describe their profession with terms taken from the world of commerce. This is not intended to denigrate the business world in any way; but the purpose of theatrical art should not be to turn astonishing profits but to create astonishing works of art.

The saddest aspect of all this is that American movies regularly did produce brilliant films as recently as the 1970s and the early 1980s. Some examples are *Nashville*, *Reds*, *Annie Hall*, *Barry Lyndon*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Chinatown*, *Carnal Knowledge*, *Julia*, *Ragtime*, *Sophie’s Choice*, *Body Heat*, *Hannah and Her Sisters* and the aforementioned *Godfather I and II*—all truly original and beautifully crafted movies. But it’s been a long while since an American film of such quality has appeared.

Of course, some of today’s professional actors, directors, and writers do indeed aspire to be artists—and they’re the ones we have to thank for the occasional American film, television show, or play presented with imagination and integrity. So there are positive signs: the recent ascendance of American independent films is one; *Northern Exposure*, for most of its run, was a delightful exception to the general blandness of television; and *Angels in America* showed that Broadway could still find room for an experimental play of substance. But the individuals responsible for such productions are too often stymied by a climate hostile to the creation of works of art. That climate, perpetuated by those who view the theatre only as an effective means of making money, has become the norm in the professional theatre. To my mind, therefore, the problems I’ve spoken about constitute a crisis for the American theatrical media.

Fortunately, however, there are two significant exceptions to the hostile climate I’ve spoken about, representing perhaps the last two places in America where the theatre is still valued as an art form. The first is in a number of non-profit regional theatres in such cities as Seattle, Minneapolis, and San Francisco—and the second is where you’re seated right now. In colleges and universities throughout the country, Schools of Theatre Arts and Departments of Theatre regularly produce plays which have proven themselves to be great creative works. Moreover, many universities also present new plays, thereby enriching dramatic literature by discovering playwrights who may one day be regarded as outstanding dramatists of our age. The non-profit theatres and the academic theatres provide the best hope for the future of theatrical art, I believe.

Academic programs in theatre are educational in every sense: for the audience, which is given the opportunity to see great works of dramatic art, and for student-actors, directors, playwrights and designers.

For many years the primary training ground for the professional theatre was the conservatory, in which students concentrated upon the study of technique. Now, though, more and more theatre professionals are emerging from university theatre programs, a great many of them from liberal arts institutions. Why? I believe it's because theatre students at liberal arts colleges, rather than focusing narrowly upon technique, are taking courses in English and psychology and history along with their theatre courses. And that's all to the good, for an actor—or a playwright, or a director, or a designer—needs to understand those things he or she will learn in such classes: how to analyze a play, how to understand what drives and motivates the characters, how the historical context in which the play is set affects the characters' behaviors. If this base of knowledge is not present the individual can never become more than a technician—proficient at a particular skill, perhaps, but unable to translate that proficiency into art. True, the achievement of artistry also involves a mastery of technique. However, in my opinion, students of theatre are best served by liberal arts undergraduate training—training that encourages and nurtures the growth of *artists*, instilling in its students an appreciation for great theatre and encouraging them to aspire to the highest level of artistry they can attain. More sophisticated technique can then be acquired in graduate programs specializing in Acting, or in Directing, or in Design.

With this training behind them, many of the theatre students in today's audience will become professionals—and, because of their broad-based learning, they have the power to bring about a significant change in the direction today's theatre is taking.

At this point, some of you may feel you've detected a logical fallacy in this discussion. If the recent graduates of liberal-arts institutions have become professionals, and if, as I maintain, that's an encouraging development, why is the theatre in crisis? Why haven't the directors, for example, who were not so long ago idealistic college students, continued to aspire to artistry? Often, they find their idealism tempered by the necessity to make a living—which generally means directing commercials and soap operas, not Sophocles and Molière. That necessity can—and often does—turn idealism to acceptance of the status quo rather quickly. And what a shame that is, for these people—who've been nurtured by the university, where they enjoy nearly complete freedom from commercial pressures, where they're encouraged to maintain their idealism, their devotion to doing the best, most profound work of which they're capable—these are the very people who have the capacity to change the current crisis in the performing arts.

Parenthetically, this is probably a good time to mention that I'm a particular fan of Woody Allen's best comedies. One of his cleverest, and one of my favorites, is *Bullets Over Broadway*, a wickedly funny satire on theatrical idealists and idealism, so I realize that from some perspectives my comments today could be seen as pretentious and overblown. Nevertheless, I believe that our theatre should embrace those idealists who would present plays and films that are capable of making us think and feel deeply, that will challenge our assumptions and might alter our views.

Is it too much to hope that graduates of university theatre programs will hold on to idealistic attitudes and carry them into their post-university lives? That, it seems to me, is our best hope for a transformation of the theatre from "show business" to art. It won't be easy, for the professional world is, in some quarters, dominated by those who detest the very idea of "art." But, over time, it's possible to envision such a transformation occurring. Perhaps it's at this very moment, when the outlook for artistry in the American professional theatre seems rather bleak, that the rebirth of idealism will begin to occur, thereby enriching all who come in contact with it. Of course, I'm assuming that most students *are* idealists who aspire to become genuine artists, and perhaps that's a naive assumption. Perhaps those who graduate from liberal arts institutions will be content to assume the values of "show business" and the "industry"—but I'm hoping that they won't. I hope they'll attempt to change the values that predominate in the commercial theatre world today. Whether that occurs will depend to some extent—probably to a very significant extent—on those of you who are not studying theatre, whose interest in the theatre is confined to what you watch on television and at the movies. Without your support the changes I've spoken about can't occur. I ask that you consider passing up the next Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sylvester Stallone movie and seeking out more ambitious works—ambitious, that is, in the sense that they attempt to provide insight into the human condition, not simply to entertain. I ask that, at least occasionally, you take advantage of the opportunity to see a play by Harold Pinter, or Shakespeare, or Euripides, or Tennessee Williams—a play that will ask more of you than an unambitious movie or television show will ask, but that can yield far greater rewards. And if you prefer the movies to the stage, why not become familiar with the classic films of artists such as Ingmar Bergman or Stanley Kubrick, or the recent work of Zhang Yimou (a name you may not be familiar with, but a director of great Chinese films, perhaps the finest film director at work today) rather than watching the latest in a series of mindless sequels? If you ignore the work of great artists in favor of the sorts of movies and television shows that currently predominate, artists will continue to be marginalized and those who trivialize our culture will continue to prosper. If, as I've suggested, those who graduate from liberal arts theatre programs have an obligation to try to change the current situation, I'm saying that the rest of us share in that obligation. As well-educated members of our society (those of you wearing academic robes are about to receive your bachelor's degrees, and many others in the

audience today possess master's and doctoral degrees, so this is indeed a highly educated gathering), I ask you to play a role in the revival of the theatre and its allied arts in American culture.

Am I suggesting that audiences should turn their backs on works that have no higher goal than to entertain? Not at all. Everyone wants a good, uncomplicated laugh now and then. I am saying that we should also seek out more ambitious works whenever possible. For all of us, audience members as well as students of theatre, our goal should be not to subtract from, but rather to add to the richness of our cultural tradition by providing encouragement to artists who wish to explore fully the issues of our time. Under those conditions, I believe that the academic theatre within the liberal arts framework can serve, not just as a training ground, but as a model for the professional theatre. And if that should come about, the theatre as a whole may once again occupy a position of great importance in American culture: presenting works of merit that go beyond the simple mastery of craftsmanship; plays and films capable of entertaining us, moving us and inspiring us—and that may accurately be described as genuine works of theatrical art.